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AUTHOR Gillespie, Judith A.; Ehman, Lee H.
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ABSTRACT

A theoretical framework for mapping school political life is developed which distinguishes elite, bureaucratic, coalitional, and participant types of school political organizations. The framework provides tools for analyzing and comparing patterns of political behavior within and across school political behavior settings. Definitions and conceptual dimensional analyses are discussed for seven school political phenomena: political influence, wealth, ideology, decision-making, leadership, participation, and communication. An analysis which arrays expected patterns of these political phenomena across school political organization types links the concepts under study. Finally, implications are drawn from the theoretical framework for the empirical study of school political life and suggestions are made for the use of the perceptions gained from the study. (Author/JH)

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THE SCHOOL AS A POLITICAL SYSTEM

Judith A. Gillespie
Lee H. Ehman

Indiana University

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Judith A. Gillespie, Indiana University
Lee H. Ehman, Indiana University

Introduction

The volume of studies which focuses on various dimensions of school political life is both sizeable and increasing. Yet, some serious descriptive and explanatory gaps remain to be filled in school politics research. In general, it lacks both conceptual and theoretical strength which would facilitate understanding of systemic patterns of school political life, and it lacks a focus on systemic patterns as independent rather than dependent variables which would promote explanations of the effects of systemic political processes on student development.

The primary objective of this paper is to suggest a conceptually sound basis for mapping schools as political systems. Although some researchers have used various analogs such as bureaucracies to explain school political life, few have focused on the school as a micro-political system in its own right. Examining systemic aspects of school political life promotes the analysis of interrelationships between multiple dimensions of political life; the exploration of generalizable patterns of behavior rather than individual activities; and the comparison of various school environments in terms that are comparable across many other levels and units of analysis. Such an analysis not only promotes the study of significantly different and important aspects of school political life, but also serves as a base for drawing inferences regarding the implications of various school political environments for school policy planning, the parameters set by these environments on school change, and the impact of political environment on student development. Therefore, another

objective of the paper is to trace the implications of similarities and differences in school political environments for school planning, change and student development.

Theoretical Framework

The mapping of various school political environments requires the development of a useful, systematic framework for viewing school political life. It is fairly easy to notice everyday political activity in schools. Many of the decisions made daily by principals, teachers and students have an overtly political cast. Generally, these decisions revolve around the governance of the school. For example, principals often devise schedules or disciplinary rules which regulate the behavior of both teachers and students; teachers make curricular decisions about what guest speakers or activities they will support in their school.

These types of political activities are also documented by a great many sources. Nunnery and Kimbrough, for example, demonstrate just how political the role of the principal can be in regard to school elections.[1] Harmon Zeigler's study demonstrates how teachers' political attitudes and participation in educational politics can be related to key background and school environment variables.[2] Neal Gross' study of superintendents and boards of education demonstrates how group pressures affect policy

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[1] Michael Y. Nunnery and Ralph B. Kimbrough, Politics, Power, Polls and School Elections, Berkeley: McCutchan Publishing Corporation, 1971.

[2] Harmon Zeigler, The Political Life of American Teachers, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1967.

decisions and the role of principals, teachers, and parents in school politics.[3] Thus, there seems little reason to doubt that schools are political places.

Yet, despite this type of research backing, few studies have attempted to view schools as systems of political behavior patterns rather than loose amalgams of isolated individual or group actions.[4] Barker and Gump illustrate the value of a systemic overview in their study Big School, Small School. They draw an analogy to a baseball game in their description of their research framework:

> "If a novice, an Englishman, for example, wished to understand the environment of a first baseman in a ball game, he might set about to observe the interactions of the player with his surroundings. To do this with utmost precision he might view the first baseman through field glasses, so focused that the player would be centered in the field of the glasses, with just enough of the environment included to encompass all his contacts with the environment, all inputs and outputs: all balls caught, balls thrown, players tagged, etc. Despite the commendable observational care, however, this method would

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[3]Neal Gross, Who Runs Our Schools? New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1958.

[4]For a more complete explanation of these ideas, see Judith A. Gillespie, Basic Research Needs: The School as a Political System, Social Studies Development Center, Bloomington, Indiana.

> never provide a novice with an understanding of the game which gives meaning to a first baseman's transactions with his surroundings, and which in fact, constitutes the environment of his baseball-playing behavior. By observing a player in this way, the novice would, in fact, fragment the game and destroy what he was seeking... he could never arrive at the phenomenon known as a baseball game by this means.... It would seem clear that a novice would learn more about the ecological environment of a first baseman by blotting out the player and observing the game around him."[5]

What is needed, according to the baseball analogy, is a way of viewing school political life that will de-emphasize the individual players so that the rules and patterns of player interaction can be understood. What is needed is a framework that will focus on the game itself, or the systemic aspects of school political life. It is only through such a framework that we can begin to see how school environments in their full dimensionality affect students' political attitudes and behaviors.

The systemic framework which is utilized here can be generally defined as follows: a system is a set of elements and their interrelationships which satisfy the following criteria: 1) one can specify

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[5] R.G. Barker and P.V. Gump, Big School, Small School, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1964.

a set of identifiable elements; 2) among at least some of the elements, one can specify identifiable relations; 3) certain relations imply others; and 4) a certain complex of relations at a given time implies a certain complex at a later time.[6] The major components of such a framework are thus elements and their interrelationships which define the nature and direction of change of the system over time.

School Political System Elements

The elements and relationships that are useful in understanding, explaining and applying knowledge of these experiences are determined largely by the general definition of politics that one holds. Surely one of the most widely used and accepted definitions of politics is those activities through which values are allocated in a system. From this definition stem two focal components of any political process: activities through which values are allocated, and the political values themselves. Major allocational activities or behaviors, then, become the focus of the framework. Such activities include political decision-making, leadership, participation, and communication. From the definitions of these variables and the specification of their interrelationships, school organizational environments can be typed.

Each of the four political activities can be defined and empirically grounded as follows:

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[6]Anatol Rapoport, "Some Systems Approaches to Political Theory," in David Easton, Varieties of Political Theory, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1966.

Political decision-making can be defined as those political activities through which choices are made between alternative courses of action in a political system.[7] The concept of political decision-making can be grounded by determining the inclusiveness of the decision-rules under which choices between alternative are made. Political systems can thus be typed by minority, plurality, majority and unanimity decision rules.[8]

Political leadership can be defined as those political activities through which influence is exercised in a political system. As a systemic behavior pattern, leadership can be grounded by the degree of reciprocity which characterized leadership-followership relationships in a political system.[9] Political systems can thus be characterized by the use of coercion, authority, advocacy, and merit in leader-follower relationships.

Political participation can be defined as those political activities through which interests are organized in a political system.[10] The concept of political participation can be grounded by determining the

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[7]David Braybrooke and Charles E. Lindbloom, A Strategy of Decision, New York: Free Press, 1963.

[8]James M. Buchanan and Gordon Tullock, The Calculus of Consent, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1967.

[9]Dorwin Cartwright, "Influence, Leadership, Control," in James G. March (ed.), Handbook of Organizations, Chicago: Rand McNally, 1965.

[10]Mancur Olson, Jr., The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups, New York: Schocken Books, 1968.

distribution of types of participation activities. Through such an index, the amount and type of participation in a political system can be determined. Political systems can thus be characterized by the proportions of long-term official, short-term official, long-term voluntary, or short-term voluntary activities that are pursued in the system.[11]

Political communication can be defined as those political activities through which information is transmitted in a political system.[12] The concept of political communication can be grounded by determining the degree of centralization in a communication system and the direction of the flow of information. Political systems can thus be characterized as centralized, mixed or decentralized, and they may have unidirectional or bidirectional information flows.

Three other systemic patterns also enter our theoretical framework: Political influence can be defined as the capacity to elicit desired responses from members of a political system. Political wealth can be defined as the human and non-human resources which support the capability to undertake political activities in a political system. Finally, political ideology can be defined as a patterned set of core beliefs about what ought to be the principles, programs, and actions of individuals or groups in a political system. For each of these systemic

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[11]Lester W. Milbrath, Political Participation, Chicago: Rand McNally, 1965.

[12]Karl W. Deutsch, The Nerves of Government, New York: The Free Press, 1966.

patterns we are generally interested in describing their range, distribution and concentration. The explication of these systemic characteristic patterns promotes the typing of school organizational environments.

Four general types of school organizational environments can be generated from these definitions and operational indices for each. Figure 1 illustrates the derivation of four such types:

FIGURE 1: SCHOOL ORGANIZATION TYPES AND SYSTEM CHARACTERISTICS

POLITICAL TYPES / SYSTEMIC CHARACTERISTICS	ELITE	BUREAUCRATIC	COALITIONAL	PARTICIPANT
I. PARTICIPATION				
1) Distribution	Skewed	Selective	Selective	Uniform
2) Concentration	High	High	Medium	Low
II. LEADERSHIP				
1) Style	Coercion	Authority	Advocacy	Merit
2) Concentration	High	Medium	Medium	Low
3) Reciprocity	Low	Medium	High	High
III. DECISION-MAKING				
1) Inclusiveness	Minority	Plurality	Majority	Unanimity
2) Range of Choice	Few	Some	Few	Many
VI. COMMUNICATION				
1) Connectedness	Low	Medium	Medium	High
2) Concentration	High	Medium	Low	Low
V. INFLUENCE				
1) Hierarchy	High	Medium	Medium	Low
2) Concentration	High	High	Low	Low
VI. WEALTH				
1) Distribution	Skewed	Selective	Selective	Uniform
2) Concentration	High	High	Medium	Low
VII. IDEOLOGY				
1) Range	Narrow	Medium	Wide	Narrow
2) Articulation	High	Medium	Low	High

"Elite" systems, for example, constitute those organizational environments in which decision-making operates by exclusive decision rules, leadership is based on force, participation is restricted and benefits are gained only by a few, and the communication structure is disconnected and unidirectional. Influence patterns are hierarchical, wealth is concentrated in the hands of a few, and the range of ideology low. On the other hand, "participatory" systems are defined as those organizational environments in which decision-making operates by inclusive decision rules, leadership is based on merit, participation is wide-ranging and therefore beneficial to most participants, and the communication structure is well-articulated. Influence patterns are diffuse, the distribution of wealth is uniform, and the range of ideology also low. Mixed systems between these two types are "bureaucratic" systems and "coalitional" or interest group systems in which the variable values most often plot on the middle ranges of the indices.

In a concrete school setting, examples of these types could take the following form:

TYPE I: ELITE	The principal and other leaders in this system use force -- disciplinary, threats on job security, etc. -- to mobilize individual and group activity. Decisions are made by the leadership elite. Participation in political decision-making is selective and based on the appointment of the leadership. Most communication is restricted to decision-makers and passed unidirectionally to most teachers and students.
TYPE II: BUREAUCRATIC	The principal and other leaders in this system use the authority of their position in order to mobilize individual and group activity. Decisions are made according to a rough majority-rule vote of participants. Participation in political decision-making is mandatory and depends on the

particular position that an actor occupies in the system. Communication is restricted to decision-makers, but advice from other groups is sought.

TYPE III: COALITIONAL — The principal and other leaders in this system represent various interests and use advocacy of that interest to mobilize individual and group activity. Decisions are made by coalitions of interests achieving a majority. Participation is open and people generally join groups in which their interests are served. Communication is largely within groups, but bargaining goes on between groups forming coalitions.

TYPE IV: PARTICIPANT — The principal and other leaders in this system use a variety of political resources -- ideas, skills, monetary promises -- in order to mobilize individual and group activity. Decisions are made according to a rough unanimity or consensus rule. Participation in political decision-making is voluntary and depends upon the particular interests of the participants. Communication between administrators, teachers and students is constant.

When these types of models are empirically grounded, the demographic mapping of school politics necessary to describe schools as political systems can be accomplished. The foundation will be laid for determining the effects of school political environments on student attitudes and behaviors.

School Political Behavior Settings

Another level of analysis for school systemic research is important. For schools are certainly not always monolithic in their political nature. Some school settings might be participant, other elite, and still others bureaucratic, all within a school which might be classified at the systemic level as coalitional. The additional level of analysis we are looking for, then, falls between the system level and the individual level and can be termed the "behavior setting level."

Within any particular type of school political system, decision-making, leadership, participation and communication settings can be defined as interdependent behavior settings in which school political actors interact. Important behavior settings in the decision-making pattern in schools can be defined as school board meetings, student council meetings, club activities, etc. Important behavior settings in the leadership pattern may include superintendent-school board, principal-teacher, and classroom teacher-student settings. Therefore, each of the patterns of activities in the framework can be grounded in some set of behavior settings within the school context.

It is thus possible, under the scheme suggested above, to empirically anchor political activities in on-going school political life by developing a list of common organized settings through which these activities occur. A common list could look like this:

1) school board meetings
2) administrative interactions
3) teachers' meetings, formal and informal
4) classroom interactions
5) meetings for student activities (newspaper, club, council, committee)

The list can be considerably extended. Indeed, in Barker and Gump's study of Kansas schools, they found over one hundred specific identifiable behavior settings in which school personnel normally participated.

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[13] Barker and Gump, op. cit.

A wide variety of behavior settings can be identified, yet it remains to be determined how these settings affect students' attitudes and behavior. Most of the standard literature on students' roles in school settings supports the notion that students gain a wide range of different experiences from their participation. Blacks, for example, are said to have different experiences than whites, scholarly students are distinguished from popular students. Yet most of this literature focuses on the characteristics of individual students that participate in the school behavior settings rather than the characteristics and effects of the settings per se. The fact that these settings are group experiences indicates that the structure of these settings may also do a great deal to mold student development. One need only to think of two student delegates participating on two different committees, one of which is run by a majority rule and one of which is run as an advisory body to the leader to imagine how different structural attributes influence students' "representative" roles.

The differential effects of student participation in school behavior settings were explored in a study done by James McPartland which drew comparisons across fourteen urban school districts. Among other findings, the study demonstrated that:

> "Participation can come in different forms, and each extra element adds a potentially different effect on students. Participation to increase social integration affects students' general satisfaction. If participation also adds new peer group mixes, new student norms will be developed, often

emphasizing academic interest. If decision-making experiences are added, responsibility and decision-making skill will be increased with more successful academic pursuits resulting as a by-product."[14]

These findings demonstrate that the type and amount of student participation that behavior settings promote can have significant effects on students' political attitudes and participatory competencies. It is therefore our contention that the study of behavior settings is key to determining the relationship between school political system types and students' attitudes and behavior.

Significance of the Research

This research has both theoretical and practical import. The conceptualization and empirical mapping of the school as a political system have important implications for the clarification and elaboration of both school politics research and systems theory in political science. If schools can effectively be characterized as political systems, then the study of schools can also be integrated into much of the body of existing research on common political phenomena such as decision-making and leadership at other levels. If the linkages prove to be useful, the research also has the potential for contributing to socialization research a significantly different perspective on a major socialization agent.

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[14] James McFartland, et. al., Student Participation in High School Decisions: A Study of Students and Teachers in Fourteen Urban High Schools, Baltimore, Maryland: The John Hopkins University, 1971.

The research will also have important implications for educational policy and practice. For both governmental and private organizations supporting educational innovation and change, the basic mapping of school political environments will contribute significant knowledge about the school organization context in which change must take place. Policy-makers should, with such data in hand, be better able to judge what types of environmental supports and limitations are relevant to the promotion of innovation in school settings. This type of information should also be valuable for those seeking to improve the impact of school curricula, for it will promote the utilization of natural school political settings that are relevant for student development for instructional purposes. In both the organizational and curricular arenas, findings from this research should bring a significantly different and important element into decision-making. Thus, the analysis of school political environments should have practical as well as theoretical import.